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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Department of English

Writing Program

Wasp Ode

by Ran Wang

A thesis presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts in
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Story

We can tell each other things

some days we tell it well

for instance: in the morning the stalks flattened.
you saw it first.

for instance: when the trees all go in one direction
we know that there is wind

We knew before the thing happened but
what good did it do

like learning a nursery rhyme,
reciting, he was a good horse a good horse

branches bending,
then flowers
something flashing in between we looked up

stop for a moment what

tell it over

We read a book out loud

in it, two children go walking.
then they go missing.

no one knows where it is they go, although
it is assumed,
as they are together, that they are happy

what else

they breathe into each others' mouths

one flings a pebble
the other observes where it lands

On the third day of walking, they come to a field
that appears strange.

one pulls a train whistle from the ash. one pulls
a bird's bone from its limb.

twisted, it resembles almost
a branch.

placed into the mouth,
it flowers.

one says, feel how hard the knots are
against the tongue

In the field:

sounds, low, and the swaying
of each sound like hills broken by
a sighting of
one dark animal then
another.

discrete

if, for every act
there is an act—

a hand places flowers on the table.

then, a noise.

1)

Swan Song

When the bells changed, I put them
in your mouth

I put my hands over

Something shaking within
that noise as if
our hands were leaves our long arms
branches our mouths

If breath could make a peak
a hook, an arrow, a missive

Something was lost we
stared at one another as if
we ourselves were
the field where it was last rumored
to have been seen

Practice in the Shadow Room

To call the body occupied, one had to first occupy—
wire suspended in an empty room.

Nothing perched on it.

When I touched you again I didn't feel
your body, exactly,
but some shape of it held in mind,
the way I held the rolling pears, their forms
cast in light. Rolling until we had forgotten
they were called pear.

You said, *we have to get to the core of it*,
and we sharpened our knives across the loins.

Gourd-flower, flesh-flower, what passed through
the bird's mouth and came away, clean.
What passed beneath the knife, the hand knowing how.

Deep inside the fruit: the cross-cut
of a hidden star.

Small Cries Like Matchflames Taken Into the Mouth Then Swallowed

Sometimes a cry would fall, then
another, just far enough apart to be singular,

the way the trees bordering the edges of the city
were singular,
each claiming its own sky, until it was
merely *tree*,

and between one cry and another,
there'd be a flutter, like birds
crumpling midair.

We moved, mouths counting across
flesh, making roundness
on flesh, making flare of
nickel striking stone—roundness of

the unspooling flame, of the widening cut—
blade flicking the space between the shoulders,
where the ribbon
is holding—the encasement—up.

Roundness like a pin
on the mouth, or leaf ringed with a hole
in the middle,

which we could make a noise through,
if we put our lips to the opening.

Elegy for the Body Falling

There was no consolation in an object
that is beautiful. No salvation

in an object that is not. The soul,
a white square on a white canvas

alien to the order of flesh and trees.
I can't make it fly or sing.

I have pressed my ear to another human
and heard nothing but white noise,

and even then what I heard was a wiring
of blood thrown through the torso.

If We Could

If we could raise a limb—and it
would spill a shadow—
if we could raise a cry and it would spill
a shadow—widened as it tumbled to overtake
all the sprays of leaves—

we made, touching, a spoke pushed
from our center—we made,
touching,
a wheel pressed into dirt—

spokes spinning broad and firm until
we did not know how to greet
our new spaces (flashing,
tender)—a loom pushing out its slats
and widening—and all the soft
thread twisted and stretched,
into what—

White Borders

In the snow, we were always waiting,
we wanted grapevines,

the buds of oranges. Thorns
that could draw blood in the mouth.

We sometimes felt like
thieves in a painting,

crouching for chickens, wondering what
would come chasing out from

beyond the row of small, brittle trees.

Perfectible World

We were logs of smoke rolling over
the dark waters. Who could even fetch us.
We were heavy as the air growing full
with low-bellied swallows before rain.
We felt, rolling, the stammer of bells,
the swing of branches, forgive us
brass jar smoke, forgive us chimney
poplar whitened wind. And if
the curtains we could not cross were girded
merely by light, could we have widened
the light until it grew large as the swing
of a bell coming over the city.

The bells
that rang, silver and sharp, pressed
through the night that was always
coming loose like a floorboard we had
pried open and never replaced properly,
so that when we walked across
the kitchen at night to brew coffee
there was always that sound of the floor
opening, shutting. And if, afterwards,
when the glassy-eyed birds came bursting
through the windows, (having fed them
pebbles, flatbread, and twine) we had
offered them even the scraps of smoke
that in the heat had grown heavy
and slicked our arms like tar, would
a ring of feathers have landed, blue
as the flash of a stone?

There was
a certain kind of sadness that could only
be pressed by others, so when we tried,
in our basins, to press it ourselves,
it only grew more undrinkable. The more
we drank the more we began to bend,
first under the branches and, slowly, below
by the waters, until we were the cattle
not knowing what it was to want
such kindness. Sometimes a sound
would fall in a throat and never rise free,
a violence soft as a petal suddenly
pinned into place, and only a string
passed from one to another could tell us

how beautiful it was, then. It was,
with growing frequency, difficult
to remember. Once, I touched my hand
to your back and smoke came away
in my hand. I said, *forgive me*
but you said, *no, it was the chimney,*
the poplars. The nest of starlings
coming loose by the side of the fence.

We were the cattle/ not knowing what it was to want such kindness

Yes yes now our hoofs are dangling
crushed grasses thin bent
beneath

move

here move slowly we are not practiced

**

have you fed yes will you prod the
grasses yes take care among
the birds they tell false news yes
take care among the rushes it is not quite
certain what they do although yes
they purport to do it daily

how bending unbending

**

look, we can mimic their bending
see, right hoof forward right hoof right
then left
then circle

**

look, the circle of grass when we
first came became first
we came here look

white stones sunlight
bright as the tint of
a meniscus I remember

remember yes the water yes
and the tenterhooks yes yes
the noise that left the mouth as
a scarf flicking around in a circle
before escaping that also

**

noise like a sleeve flicking around
a doorknob but louder noise
of something coming loose
bones stitching tight crumpling
before we had a chance to cry out
and then herded here we are

**

here remember the noises
we made which ones
we tried to talk to one another yes

I said, say something what anything just
say something then what

noises sounded like
water tumbling in a hollow
log roundness
holding no form water yes

crashing on a bed
of water

remember how it was

**

and the ones we used
to make

trace a hoof around it what
remember what
once, I said I will break you I traced
a finger across your mouth

my yes my mouth

**

what was that thing called starling
no no that other thing anvil

what about the ones we used to scoop into
each others' mouths

spoon no, it was ours
hands

Elegy for Allowance

I made a shroud in the mouth.

Light, but heavier than what I could hope to keep.

As if I had stolen something, and, just as the shopkeeper
had turned my way, had pushed it inside the mouth

and my punishment was to never be able to
show it to anyone.

Their Mouths Like Cut Jars Catching the Light

The shaft of light is making
patterns on the glass surfaces,
and we are given permission
to move the glass man

and the glass woman, position
them any way we'd like:
change the way light shifts,
over them, the way it bends

and breaks—there—bends and
suddenly yields, and, for
a moment, passes—through—
enters the bodies completely,

if they can be called bodies,
anymore—like looking onto
a lake and seeing only a clean
surface, as we seek to look,

and, in looking, can only
transform what we see (grass,
lake, two swans) into that which
is flattened where it meets our

gaze, where no entry is forbidden,
but no entry is guaranteed.

Squinting, It Was Hard To Tell

When the first of the longings left,
it came back months later, with only
a tooth missing. She gave it food.
It began to sing. It was only when they
all began to go missing that she started
to worry. She was not accustomed
to worry. She felt that she was not
very practiced, and in perfecting it
she might often make mistakes.
More so than the missing itself,
it was the mistaking that worried her.
Where were they, she wondered,
now free of their cooings in the night.
How were they doing, with plenty
of strange bodies to feed them.

2)

Visitation

You wanted to know why I
called you a *body*.

Soul, you opened into flesh
so forcefully—

the way a hand clenched into
a fist too long
thrusts open, numb.

Marie Antoinette in a Display of Jellyfish

When I tell a lie, the jellyfish know.
They look my way.
They know everything about me.

Once, I danced with courtiers, holding my body
close to its own center of gravity.

I remember the mirrors factually,
how you could blow your breath on them
and then make a picture.

This glass is bigger on the inside, expansive.

The others float through the case,
pushed by some invisible current.

They have no need to navigate their own desire.

They are the traces by which it can be seen.

Microphones, Bread, and Love

Let me speak candidly.

In brutality I found a beauty wholly other
from that of a woman walking across
a room to rearrange flowers.

You could say that it was itself
the flower,
a bloom in the corner of an eye

and for which I practiced my movements
the way a songbird rehearses its

frenetic crests and troughs in its head
all night long

before releasing them to air.

Herself in a Landscape of Aster

Between the visible world and the
invisible, there is a slit, sharp as a cut
made by a thin-edged leaf drawn across
the mouth. Or a knife wielded
between the two bundles of the mind.

Here, white flowers open, endlessly,
up to the point where the eye moves and
presses and can go no further.

Can one pass through the slit
and remain unchanged?

I move my hand. I try to make a motion
that a passerby can detect.

Elegy for the Body Erased

If the body is a site where
all music stops mid-

, tell me who
made these I

must look at and call
beautiful. Years will

I push dirt
thinking of his corpse,

thinking . Even
something in emptiness that

resembles hunger. It must
be possible to burrow

the earth and
a clearing

Alabaster Match

A thing that is invented has many lives.
It can keep on replicating without you.

I set a scarab husk on some springs
and watched it fly. I waited for
the dust to settle beneath. And meanwhile
the spectators were waiting, admiring
the entire contraption of spectacle.

Everything I have ever wanted was caught
in that space between willing a thing into being
and willing it to go.

Some days a spun clock, some days a tightly-
wound hand of cards. I had questions.

I pitched them to the stars in their infinite grid.

How do I prevent hunger from taking over
my life? I asked and asked.

And they said, Can you light a ghost's hair on fire?
What sort of match would you use?

3)

Wasp Ode

Herself

Look: wool makes sparks over the eyes
if chafed

across skin at a certain

speed. In a flash, one can see

everything, before becoming again
submerged.

Once, I built my looking-glass out of wire
and weft.

I waited until obfuscation

distressed me, knowing as I did
how to make it

mine. I could no longer place my own
nature,

carried my losses like a dark
red flower, as if a flower were

a tourniquet for the branch
that made it,
each petal bent back and layered
like shale.

I carried two trees like torches, one within the torso,
the other within the mind. And the roots of one

spread in the world as the other held me
to the ground, kept me there....

I held onto people who were missing and to

things unmade by people

(A flower blooms. I cry.
I walk to the store to buy bread in the mornings.)

The Other

Yes, she looked like me, the girl who called herself by
what she was in relation to others.

She appeared sometimes in the corners of reflections,

in the plate of water I had left out in the flat for three days
in the curve of the transistor radio I was given on my third birthday
in the door that I passed through to get to my place of work.

I could see her flickering. I knew her.

The way she held her hands apart when she wanted
to hide something, the manner in which she cried.

*

In the Republic of Mercy, we had come to understand
that objects change each others' properties in space:

that atoms tug and shift each other in space:

that the innate characteristics of each object are marked only by a complicated lattice of
compulsion and repulsion:

that, in tandem, compulsion and repulsion form the shapes called human, bird, tumbler,
xylophone.

*

When she cried, I was compelled.

When she moved her hands, I was repulsed.

When I moved my hands too, she was always gone.

Herself

Sometimes, there was a screen, through which it was possible

to see all things:

the crests, the troughs, the strange

oases in which moss could would lick the body, rear to neck,

and there would be some rupture; a sound, perhaps,

a slab of light that slid through an opening and worked its way in,

hardened and whole, clarified—

so for a moment,

we'd be jolted, I and the other, looking in the back of the glass

to find what could be seen out of the corners of the eye,

a shadow through a cataract:

we saw the world first through a slit

then we were the aberration

The Other

We had, following other discoveries,
synced up particular voices to particular physiognomies:
particular gestures to particular emotions:
everything equalized as to marginalize room for harm.

Harm had its own rooms, in the Grand Mausoleums
beneath the city epicenter.

Proscribed visiting hours for the curious were 9 to noon.

An ex-boyfriend claimed to have stolen a steel cat
from the corridors, tied it up with wire,
and had it re-programmed to recite Keats in a staccato voice
when he had intelligentsia over.

Another friend said she met her fiancé there.

Probably neither of them had ever even seen
the inside of that place.

Herself

I'd stretched a sheet out over the screen, like a curtain
in a morgue. Every once in a while trees made shadow puppetry
through it, slim with their slim shapes which I could not grapple or feud,
feeding them as I did to the ambient dark and things
that lurked in it, like feeding scraps to a scrappy dog you want
to grow larger, whose teeth come to scrape across the sinew
of the heart and calves in gratitude, in composure. When one thing
came, there was always another, a series of bright lights answering
each others' calls, watchtowers on a phantom fissure. This was my life.
And sometimes a thing would go missing.

The Other

In year twenty of the Republic of Mercy there came to be built
a glass-bottomed boat that could fit half the people

of the nation, exactly half. In it you could
travel, go places, see fish in their many-finned splendor.

Above: a large wood dome. Flat, dark,
the bodies fitted into each space like coins in a slot.

I took the boat for many rotations, travelled in my sleep,
marveled at the ingenuity of the burrs that turned,

always propelling the thing forward, not leaving us to rest.
Below: the infinite world,

all its ligaments, all its creatures.

Herself

And each time a thing went missing there was
an aftermark, a singe that could be sensed only if
I happened to brush right up against the edge of it,
like a dog against a leg, or an elephant scurrying around
a dime. If I pushed into the center of it
there was only a whiff of a memory, marking what
I should have know, as a pear shaped mark on wood
comes to stand in for pear or something that just looked
like it, something much larger—

The Other

When a signal sent collided with a signal from the receiver,
the peaks and valleys could easily skew,
and all of the frequencies occurred at all the wrong times.

Therefore I had trouble understanding her, the girl from beyond.

But I always knew
the tap of the rhythm, learned it in my sleep, could reproduce
it without really understanding. Tap *tap* tap. Tap tap *tap tap*.

A message like a mistake you make so many times
it becomes ritual rather than accident,

or something you appropriate into a private lexicon,
say, the eye of an iris, so bright and large

it comes to represent sorrow, or drowning.
A marble placed in the mouth.

When you look away it is once again *iris*.

Like that, but over and over.

The Other

Like something misplaced followed by the tap that responds
to the silence carved out by it.

You know how sometimes a person you love walks off
the balcony one day, and the next day you can
just go on living your life?

Then months later you're reading something completely random
but it has the word "pressure-hook" in it,
and you start crying nonsensically.

Or you write a letter to your mother and it's lost in the currents
of a solar-storm. Then the repair agencies go: "soon,
communications will resume, soon..." And *soon*
comes to stand in for the thing you meant to tell her.

Herself

Because I had, in order to make sense out of nonsense,
begun to make a compendium: what to maim, who to trust.

Because violence was necessary to seeing
something truly, as when a parent tosses a lamp across a room
in anger, and for a moment before breaking, it makes the other objects
in the room careen across the walls.

I wanted to understand the properties of how things broke:
what it looked like, what it meant. If in fact, it wasn't possible to build
the world anew. What atoms, what ligaments we would then
be building from. Love as not a phantom hand reaching over
a phantom hand, but rather, something in the world;
not an object but a directionality for other forces of motion.

The Other

When I was a little kid, my mother made me an anagram
game to keep me occupied when no one was around.

You can do it with anything, she said.
Try starting with *wode-sparrow*.

She might have said wood-sparrow,
I think I heard it wrong.

When I was lonely I would start repeating it to myself,
permutating it. And only later did I realize that
the choices were fairly limited:

wode-sparrow, wasp-ode, sorrow-ape.

Yes, it became a staving off of enclosure,
an ordering of nonsense,

a rasping noise that lingered everywhere in the world

Herself

Once, I made my looking-glass
out of wire and weft.

I carried my losses like a dark red flower,
as if a flower were a tourniquet
for the thing that made it, each petal layered

and bent back like shale...

Outside the trees clicked

as wind moved through the flat wood-
tokens that people had hung in them,

as if they could ward out harm or
keep in what

could harm within reason.

(I stretch out a hand to the screen, touch the other one—

try to cross—)

4)

Spring Rituals

To walk to the river, I must first pass through panes of glass. There is a propped ladder I use to get out of the window at night, although sometimes I switch the window up. So as to not repeat the same escape too often.

After many hours, there is no significant change in the water.

*

A woman I admire gives me a stone. I can't parse the meaning of this.

I like the feeling of hoisting a bag of stones up—how the contents shift, and, for a moment, there seems to be a choice between lifting the bag and keeping myself steady.

*

At the museum, I find an anchor used in the last great conquests of the Dutch empire. I know almost nothing of the Dutch, other than their obsessive cultivation of the tulip.

There are three clumps of tulips on the desk in my room, two of them wilted and splayed in all directions. The third isn't there yet.

*

Every morning when I wake up, I stare at my flowers first.

I decide this isn't about sinking or drowning. At night, so many of the girls I know go to the river and peel their clothes off, launch in—and all of them make it.

Mea Culpa Elegy

I thought I could hone my mind until
intellect and emotion were
a single organ. The way a snake's motion
comes from the musculature
of its entire body, and when it moves
there is no part of it that
has not moved.

An Exercise

Somewhere, a glass box dreams of another glass box,
then another. It does that thing boxes do,

which is to pretend there is something inside other than
a replica of itself, smaller and more mysterious.

In the glass box dream, all things become equal.
This is the nature of the operation.

Think of the best recent dream you've had. Then the worst.

If you put them together, what happens?
A bear clawing its way through a lemon-cake.

You see, aggregating things is nonsense. And yet.

Come Close to It

We could be magnanimous if only we
had the cards to hold up the house,
says the woman dancing across the room
with a strip of cloth in her teeth and a bucket
in her hands. She says, The glass box
and the alabaster match are lonely too.
Behind her: a plaster moon, so huge and
perfect I can't even approach it.
There is no order to things that need
saving. She dances as the room
lurches into spring. The red mouth of a dog
opens in delight next to the white rind
of the world, which falls away at
the cut, symmetrically.

Elegy for the Refusal

Even now, I do not know how
to go through with this procedure.
I'd rather let the entire stem
of the body atrophy than cut off
a single hand. Here, in the room,
I lick the threads so that the two bits fuse,
then blow them clean. Sun makes a halo
behind the hand-held mirror. The mirror
is cold on the side I face, plate of flame
on the other. My face is clear.

How do I let go, if I'm not willing
to leave anything behind?

Red Velvet Confessional

I sleep far too often. When I wake it is
too bright, then too dark,

then too bright again. Soft and easy to stroke:
the bed, offering no resistance. I dream.

Steel, starling, aster: things
having nothing to do with me

hurt me. Spruce, positioning
its points toward sky. The sound

of the word “spruce,” like the sensation of
a knife sliding through two sheaves

of agar. Just soft enough of an incision
that I can imagine it going through

something that has less
give—

I wake with my head in a snake’s
mouth. Then someone comes
with a silver hammer to take off its head.

*

All my life I have wanted to feel that I
am worth something. The way a sheep
has worth, sheared for the winter
warming, its white flame of wool coaxed
into something of use.

Each helper with a hoof in one hand
holding tight the white thing as
it squirms, tries to kick free into
the stark landscape, blind need
tumbling forth with the urgency
of animal resistance.

*

I hold my head under a faucet.

I touch my neck.

There is no better way to understand
the mechanism

of a body than to see how it functions
under adverse circumstances.

Like listening to the falter of
a clockwork whose toothed
gears bite into all the wrong parts.

The saw-toothed grind of it goes and goes.

In the river, the fish all go one way
in the soft silt, their bodies
becoming obscured yet traceable.

*

So often I have wanted to place
myself in danger,

past the point of possible salvation,
as if it would make my frantic

mind reasonable. I dream
I am a martyr. I walk back and forth

in the kitchen all day, filling my
body with rice and spices for the kill.

I circle the same space over and over,
with an urgency that seems to

come from nothing, silk scarf
from a red sleeve of failure—

and I, falling

in an open field am no more
the field (which amplifies, in patterns
of bent grass,

motions of the field mice that

pass through motions of the wind
that passes through

and all the strangers'
gesturing) I am no more that
than the bullets are each

a widening pinhole of light

Elegy Addressed

the antler blooms on the body took over the entire

—if, indeed, it could have been called
the entire—

what left you first came back as a crash,
pushing through the waves, not wanting to give you up
I didn't want to give you up

in all the cymbals, there was only the great force

under great constraint, love comes, tumbling, through
large crests of the filigree of

Or what came after then, folding
and buckling as

the weeping cranes, with tips that sweep
to the side among reeds

might find a place between sun
and hydrangea bird and sea

Notes

Elegy for the Body Falling references the Kazimir Malevich painting, “White Square on White,” 1918.

White Borders is an ekphrastic of the same painting.

Elegy for the Body Erased is an erasure of a poem that I myself wrote.